

By the way, both leaders in my last conversations, or the last couple of them, have been saying, “You must come and visit us before you leave.” And of course, I never committed until however long it was ago, 48 hours ago.

So okay, I’m going to go take a nap.

NOTE: The interview began at 11:39 p.m. aboard Air Force One en route to Afghanistan. In his remarks, the President referred to President Hu Jintao of China; Lt. Gen. Raymond T. Odierno, USA, commanding general, Multi-National Corps—Iraq; Gen.

David H. Petraeus, USA, commander, U.S. Central Command; President Asif Ali Zardari of Pakistan; former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto of Pakistan, who was killed in a suicide attack in Rawalpindi, Pakistan, on December 27, 2007; Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice; President Mahmoud Abbas of the Palestinian Authority; Prime Minister Ehud Olmert of Israel; and Chairman Kim Jong Il of North Korea. The transcript was released by the Office of the Press Secretary on December 15. A tape was not available for verification of the content of this interview.

Remarks to Military Personnel at Bagram Air Base, Afghanistan December 15, 2008

The President. Thank you all very much. Thanks for the warm welcome. Thanks for coming out to greet me at a kind of a strange hour. [Laughter] General, I appreciate your accommodating what I’m calling Rudolph One. [Laughter] After all, it is the holiday season. You might have heard, we made a little refueling stop in Baghdad earlier today. And now I’m proud to be back in Afghanistan. You might call it as—a early-morning wake-up call. Or in some of your cases, I might have shut—cut your evening off. We won’t go there. [Laughter] In either case, I am proud to be with brave souls serving the United States of America.

And my dear wife sends her very best regards. So on behalf of Laura and everybody else back home, Merry Christmas and a happy holidays. Congratulations on your tremendous accomplishments. And above all, thank you for volunteering to defend the United States of America.

You know, they often say, “What are you going to miss?” I’ll miss the airplane, of course. [Laughter] But I’m mainly going to miss being the Commander in Chief of such an outstanding group of men and women.

I appreciate Sergeant Major Vince Camacho for his service. I want to thank Ambassador Bill Wood; the commanding general of U.S. Forces, Afghanistan, General David McKiernan; Brigadier General Mike Holmes, commanding general, 45th [455th]* Expeditionary Wing; soldiers of the 101st Airborne, the Screaming Eagles.

I told the General that I had the honor of going to Fort Campbell the other day. And I saw a lot of your comrades, and I saw a lot of your families. And they have a message for you: Air Assault!

I thank the airmen of the 455th Air Expeditionary Wing. I kind of like your motto: “Start right, finish strong.”

Audience members. Hooah!

The President. Yes, that sounds pretty good for a guy with 36 days left. [Laughter]

The soldiers of the 3d Brigade Combat Team; 1st Infantry Division, the Big Red One; soldiers of the 1st Maneuver Enhancement Brigade, Task Force Warrior; I want to thank all the troops from our coalition partners.

* White House correction.

I appreciate your countries for supporting this noble cause. I want to thank all the civilians, the diplomats, the Embassy personnel who are critical to our success. I thank all the other brave Americans here today, including members of the United States Navy, the United States Marine combat personnel, FBI agents—

Audience members. Whoo!

The President. And last but not least—[laughter]. They may sound small, but they're plenty tough. And last but not least, the 101st Army Band. You probably played some high notes to keep the folks awake. [Laughter]

Afghanistan is a dramatically different country than it was 8 years ago. When I took office in 2001, the Taliban was brutally repressing the Afghan people. Girls were denied access to school. People who did not submit to the regime's radical beliefs were beaten in the public or executed in soccer stadiums. Al Qaida had freedom rein to operate the country—in the country. And it was here in Afghanistan that the terrorists planned the attacks of September the 11th, 2001.

After that date, America gave the Taliban a choice: You can turn over the leaders of Al Qaida, or you can share in their fate. And when they refused, our just demands were enforced by the United States military. And thanks to you, the Taliban has gone from power, the Al Qaida training camps are closed, and 25 million Iraqis are free. And the American people, your loved ones, are more secure.

Removing the Taliban was a landmark achievement, but our work did not end there. See, we could have replaced one group of thugs with another strongman. But all that would have done is invited the same problems that brought us the Al Qaida safe havens and the attacks on America in the first place. Those were the mistakes of the 1980s and 1990s, and we were not going to repeat them again in the 21st century.

So America set an ambitious goal to help Afghanistan's young democracy grow and

thrive and emerge as an alternative to the ideology of hate and extremism and terror. This is a difficult and long effort. It's not easy to do this. It would have been so much simpler to say we got rid of one bunch and here's another one. But that's not what we believe is right. We want to lay the foundation of peace for generations to come. We want to do the hard work now so our children and our grandchildren can grow up in a peaceful world.

So we rallied good allies to our side, including every member of NATO. We've developed civilian experts in the form of [civilian]* reconstruction teams. And together with the determined people of Afghanistan, we are making hopeful gains.

Thanks to you, girls are back in school across Afghanistan. Does that matter? I think it does. I think it does. Thanks to you, boys are playing soccer again and flying kites and learning to be Boy Scouts. Thanks to you, access to health care is up dramatically. Thanks to you, Afghanistan's economy has more than doubled in size. And thanks to you, the Afghan people are preparing to go to the polls next year for another round of free elections. Thanks to you, Afghanistan has a democratic Government that is no longer an enemy of America; it is a friend of America.

The enemies of freedom in Afghanistan are determined, no question about it. And the fight has been tough, I don't need to tell you. This is a large country. It has a long way—it's a long way away from a modern economy with a viable infrastructure. It's hard to get around Afghanistan. Yet we have a strategic interest, and I believe a moral interest, in a prosperous and peaceful democratic Afghanistan. And no matter how long it takes, we will help the people of Afghanistan succeed.

As a sign of our commitment, we've increased American troop levels in Afghanistan. Our NATO allies have done the same, and so have the Afghan people. The Afghan

* White House correction.

Army and police have grown. I call it a quiet surge. It's a surge that hasn't gotten much attention. But it has an unmistakable message: The Taliban has gone from power, and it's not coming back. Al Qaida terrorists have lost their safe haven in Afghanistan, and they're not going to get it back. Afghanistan will be a successful society and a hopeful society and a free society. And Afghanistan will never again be a safe haven for terrorists to attack the United States of America.

In recent months, the violence has increased in some parts of Afghanistan. This is partly because we're going into new areas where the terrorists have never been challenged before. And if the enemy are fighting back, they don't like it when we show up. But ultimately, they will be no match for the Afghan people or her coalition partners. And they're certainly no match for the men and women of the United States military.

I am confident we will succeed in Afghanistan because our cause is just, our coalition and Afghan partners are determined. And I am confident because I believe freedom is a gift of an Almighty to every man, woman, and child on the face of the Earth. Above all, I know the strength and character of you all. As I conclude this final trip, I have a message to you and to all who serve our country: Thank you for making the noble choice to serve and protect your fellow Americans.

What you're doing in Afghanistan is an— is important, it is courageous, and it is selfless. It's akin to what American troops did in places like Normandy and Iwo Jima and Korea. Your generation is every bit as great as any that has come before. And the work you do every day is shaping history for generations to come.

Because of you, America now has a strong friend and partner in the fight against extremism in a pivotal part of the world. Because of you, people across the broader east—Middle East now have an example of a more hopeful path, a model

of liberty that can prevail over tyranny and terror. Because of you, killers who wanted to take the lives of Americans back home have been brought to justice before they reached our shores. And because of you and all who work to protect our Nation, America has done something many said was impossible: We have gone more than 7 years without a terrorist attack on our homeland.

This time of year is especially a time when we thank the Almighty for our freedoms. And we think of those who laid down their lives to protect those freedoms. Back home their children are growing up without a mom or a dad. But all of our children are growing up with something else: the promise of a safer America, the promise of a better world, and the more likelihood for peace.

This is a lasting memorial, all who have sacrificed here in Afghanistan. And thanks to you, that memorial will be achieved, and the sacrifice of your comrades will not have been in vain. We think of the comrades who have been wounded. And our Nation pledges that we will give them all the care and all the support they need to recover.

And finally, we think of your families back home. You've got a loved one wondering what you're doing, how you're doing; I want you to do me a favor: When you get back to wherever you're getting back to, call them, e-mail them, or write them. Tell them you love them and tell them the Commander in Chief thanks them for their sacrifice, thanks them for loving you like they do, and thanks for—thank them for standing with you as you serve the noble cause of peace.

I am proud to be with you. I thank you from the bottom of my heart. May God bless you, and may God continue to bless the United States of America.

NOTE: The President spoke at 5:38 a.m. In his remarks, he referred to Command Sgt. Maj. Vincent Camacho, USA, 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault).

The President's News Conference With President Hamid Karzai of
Afghanistan in Kabul, Afghanistan
December 15, 2008

[At this point, President Karzai spoke in Dari, and no translation was provided.]

President Karzai. Most welcome, Mr. President. Most welcome.

President Bush. Thank you, sir. Yes, thanks, Mr. President; it's good to be with a dear friend. You and I have spent a lot of time together, and we have done a lot of work together, all aiming to give the people of Afghanistan a better life. And I'm proud to be with you.

I hope you understand why it is important for me to get back to Washington, and that is because my wife expects for me to be back in Washington. [Laughter] We have a holiday reception at the White House, and so I'm going to have to hustle back; after all, I did sneak out of town under the dark of night. And now I'm going to go back home having visited this important country. So thanks for having me. And she sends her best. As you well know, that Laura's—one of her great passions is to stand with the courageous women in Afghanistan. And I can assure you, Mr. President, that after our time in Washington, we both look forward to continuing to stay in touch and to continuing to stay engaged with the people of Afghanistan. So Laura sends her deep respect and great affection for the people of Afghanistan.

You know, I was thinking when I—right before we landed, how much Afghanistan has changed since I have been the President. And sometimes it's hard when you're in the midst of a difficult situation, it's hard to get perspective. In 2001, the Taliban were brutally repressing the people of this country. I remember the images of women being stoned or people being executed in the soccer stadium because of their beliefs. There was a group of killers that were hid-

ing here and training here and plotting here to kill citizens in my country.

Right after the attacks, I made it abundantly clear that we would bring people to justice for our own security and made it abundantly clear that if a group of people harbored a terrorist, they were equally as guilty as a terrorist. And we gave the Taliban an opportunity to respond; they didn't. And American troops proudly liberated the people of Afghanistan. That's what life was like.

Now we could have replaced one power person with another. That would have been, I guess, the easy route, and then just left it behind, say we've done our duty and we've upheld the doctrine, and said, "Okay, we're now going to take this group, replace them with this group," and just got out of the way. But that's not—that, one, didn't learn the lessons of the eighties and the nineties. And secondly, the interest is to build a flourishing democracy as an alternative to an hateful ideology. And it's not easy work. Afghanistan is a huge country. The road system is not nearly as well developed as a lot of other countries. You're just beginning to develop your resource base in a way that I hope benefits the people of Afghanistan; after all, it's their resources.

It's difficult because extremists refuse to accept the beauty of democracy. They've got a different vision, and so therefore, they're willing to kill innocent people to achieve their objectives.

There has been a lot of progress since 2001; after all, girls are back in school. I happen to believe that's important. As the father of twin girls, I couldn't imagine living in a society where my little girls couldn't have a chance to realize their God-given potential.

President Karzai. Yes.